

AMERICAN SCHOOLS OF ORIENTAL RESEARCH
JERUSALEM AND BAGHDAD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWSLETTER

Confidential

Not for publication

Newsletter #3

1956-57

Baghdad Oct. 26, 1956

Baghdad had a warm reception awaiting me when I arrived on October 6 to join the Iraq Surface Survey. Not only was Dr. Robert Adams at the airport to greet me most cordially but the sun of the closing days of summer pushed the temperature to well over 100° by mid-afternoon. The official reading for Monday, October 8, for example, was 105.8°!

It was on this same Monday that we went to Hillah to establish a base for our first days of exploration. Those who are acquainted with the Baghdad-Hillah highway will be glad to know that it has improved in spots, but much plain dirt road remains with its attendant clouds of dust in summer and with the inevitable mud when the winter rains finally come. In a little more than two hours one can complete the journey to Hillah.

Before I go further, however, allow me to introduce the cast of the Iraq Surface Survey, a joint undertaking of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the ASOR. Dr. Robert Adams serves as the field director, archeologist, map maker, and attends to the multitude of other more mundane duties, like bookkeeping, for example, which are the lot of any expedition leader. Sayid Abdul Munim represents the Department of Antiquities in a capable fashion. Yasin, our driver, is the son of a Hillah garage proprietor. We hope, therefore, that we have acquired a mechanic as well as a driver. No serious test of his ability has yet presented itself, but that time will doubtless come much too soon! Finally, I will the role of epigrapher and as such must attempt to identify any written evidence which we may find. I also take a hand with recording notes on the various sites which we visit and with the collection, treatment, and analysis of the potsherds which we gather at each mound. At appropriate intervals a local guide and perhaps a policeman may accompany us, but the four already named form the solid core of the expedition.

As for the Iraq Surface Survey, what is its purpose and how does it operate? We are searching for two things which go hand in hand--sites inhabited in ancient times (villages, towns, and cities), and through these sites the rivers or canals which must have accompanied them. So far as we know within the period of written records, at least, and how much longer I cannot say, southern Iraq has always had too little rainfall to sustain sedentary life. In cuneiform texts of the third millennium B.C. there is frequent reference to canals and their maintenance. Certain cities are said in texts of this period to be located, for example, on the ancient course of the

Euphrates. Our search for ancient sites will give us, therefore, both the old canals and rivers on the one hand and village, town, and city settlement patterns on the other. Many tells are on present day maps and others are not. During the course of our exploration we expect, therefore, to be able to add numerous sites to the existing antiquities maps--a task which now seems almost endless.

How do we work? Armed with the best maps available the four of us climb into our trusty (?) Jeep and strike out for an area already determined. We examine every tell which the map indicates and many which it does not. One may ask how a mound is recognized. Here in southern Iraq, on the great flat plain between the two rivers, wherever people have lived for any length of time there is an accumulation of earth and debris from that habitation which causes a town site to rise above the surrounding plain. Borsippa, SW of Hillah, is most spectacular in this fashion. Its highest point, the ziggurat, is said to reach 47 meters above the plain. It can be seen for miles. Even humble sites may rise from 2-4 meters. How does the accumulation accrue? Buildings in ancient times, as is often the case even now, were made for the most part from sun dried brick. If the winter rains, for example, caused a mud covered roof to collapse, what happened? The clay was thrown out into the street or possibly left in the floor of the house after the roof was repaired. In either case the ground level was raised. If a building fell down due to old age or lack of proper maintenance the ground level rose in that particular spot. These are only two of a multitude of ways that such an accumulation could be made to make no mention whatever of sewage and garbage disposal problems. In a flat plain, therefore, one can ordinarily see where ancient tells, now deserted, are by noting any rise above the plain. Any true mound, of course, will also be covered with small and large fragments of broken pottery, potsherds, the most constant reminder of civilization of the past in this region.

At each mound examined we make notes with regard to the present Arabic name of the site and often of the present owner of the land. This is Sayid Munim's principal task in addition to that of interpreter. We gauge the height, length, and breadth of the tell in meters, the main direction of its orientation, note any visible signs of old canals, its exact compass bearings with regard to fixed mapped points or landmarks, and finally make a collection of potsherds. Potsherds, when properly understood, form a reliable basis for dating because certain types of rims, bases, and decoration, for example, are characteristic of and found only in certain historical periods. By placing the mounds visited on maps and assigning different colors to various periods like red for Old Babylonian, blue for Ur III, etc., we can tell at a glance what sites were inhabited and in what eras. Lines of tells of the same period indicate the course of the rivers and canals at that particular time. This briefly is our purpose and method of work.

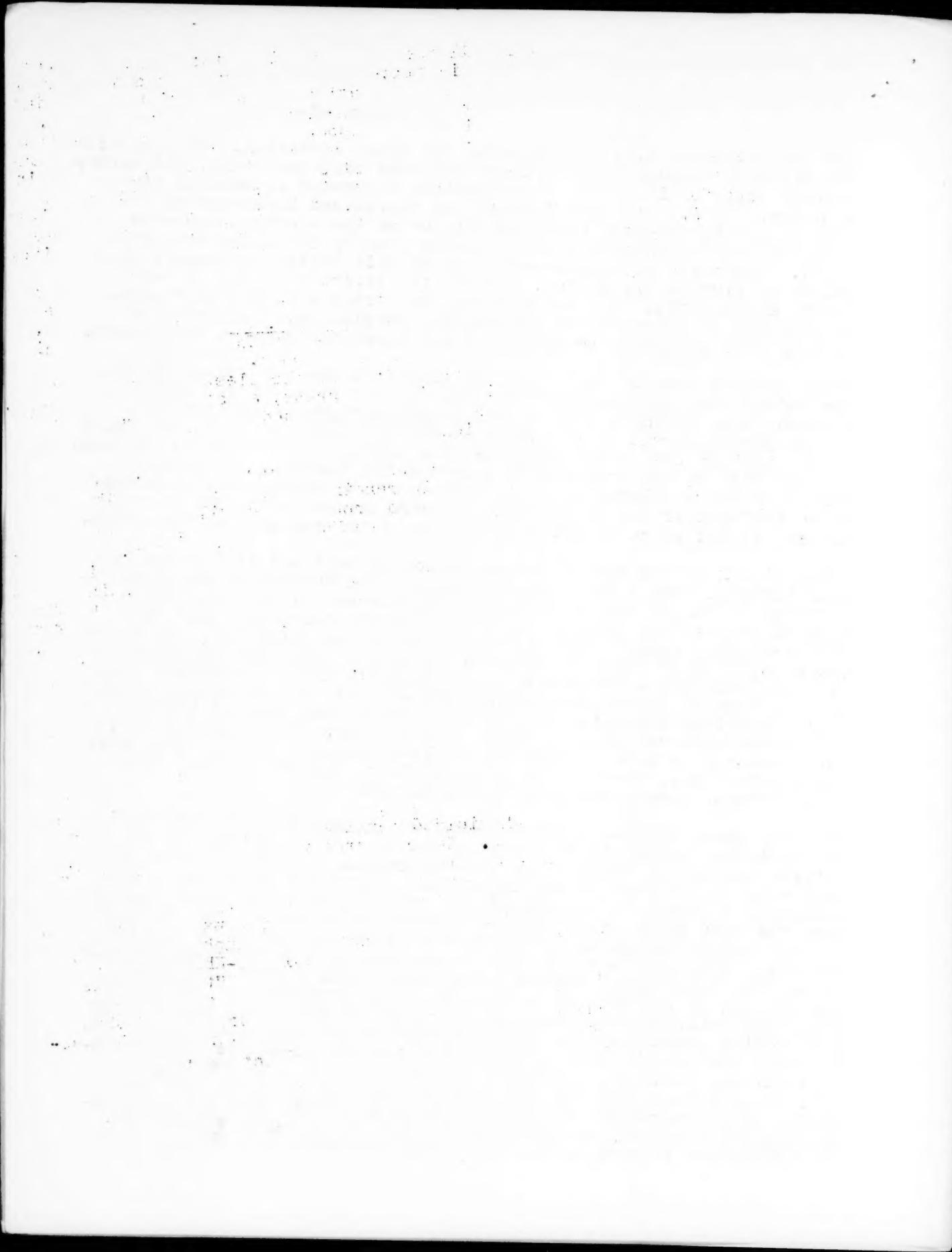
What are the periods of time in which we are most interested and what are the general geographic limitations of our present October 1956-March 1957 season? The older watercourses and settlement patterns of

the 4-2 millennia B.C. will receive our chief attention. To come all the way down through Islamic times would be very rewarding, but such a grand scale of intensive investigation is beyond either our time or means. We hope to work between the Tigris and Euphrates with Baghdad as the northern limit and Nippur as the southern one--the distance between these two places being roughly 100 miles as a crow flies. Obviously we cannot cover all of this region thoroughly in a period of five or six months, but we will strive to visit as many mounds as possible. If, for example, we strike a line of old sites we will try to pursue it to its logical conclusion. In the older periods this should be roughly in a N-S direction between the rivers.

Where have we been so far? As I mentioned at the beginning, Hillah, the modern town near ancient Babylon, was our first base. Quite by accident when paying a call at the mutasarrifiyah we met the Rev. Harold Davenport who is in charge of the new United Mission in Hillah which utilizes the former YMCA building there. He invited us to come. For ten days we had comfortable quarters for sleeping and working. Good food was available in Asa's Restaurant, a native establishment. While the weather was so hot (and it remained so during our stay in Hillah) a good place to which to retire in the evening was important.

Using Hillah as the hub of our operation we went out from there in slightly more than a half circle ranging from Mahawil on the N to Borsippa on the SW with a radius of roughly ten miles. For three days we worked N of Babylon up to the Mahawil canal and W of the Hillah-Baghdad road to the Hillah branch of the Euphrates. We visited a total of 10 sites in this area with the hope that we might find at least one contemporary with Babylon's most flourishing time. In this hope we were unsuccessful, because with the exception of two tells, possibly inhabited in Seleucid times, near Mahawil itself all the mounds were occupied in Early Islamic times (7-10 century A.D.) and abandoned by Late Islamic times (11-13 century A.D.). Even with these late sites, however, it is possible to suggest a canal line which brought them water from the Euphrates.

The next three days we spent at Borsippa (modern Birs Nimrud) and its environs, hoping to find some trace of a canal between it and Babylon concerning which there is some record. In this intent we were also denied because Borsippa itself and a few small tells immediately adjacent to it, comprising actually only one large complex, were the only tells which yielded remains belonging to the Neo-Babylonian period and earlier. In this area we visited 18 mounds and are able to propose a canal line connecting them in Parthian-Islamic times, but there is no earlier material. While a more intensive examination of the area is warranted, it is possible, if not probable, that Borsippa received the major part of its water supply from a direction other than the Hillah branch of the Euphrates to the NE. In fact, the latest finds on Tell Imam Ibrahim al-Khalil, immediately adjoining Borsippa, belonging to the 16th and 17th centuries A.D. suggest that this was the case in that period also, for the string of tells running NE toward Hillah on either side of the present Nejef-Hillah highway have neither remains as early as the Neo-Babylonian nor as late as the 16th-17th centuries A.D.



Finally, we went to Kish (NE of Hillah) and to other tells to the S and E of it for a period of two days. Including Kish itself we saw another 13 sites but of these only Kish, which was, of course, well known already, proved to be old. The others apparently belong to Islamic times. A group of tells known as Tulul al-Sidrah, assigned by us to Late Islamic times, is of particular interest for its surface remains both in pottery and architecture. The latter can be traced very easily on the surface with a minimum of effort. Excavation there should prove rewarding for its particular period.

For a week now we have been back in Baghdad clearing supplies shipped out by boat from customs, getting a new series of maps, washing, numbering, and analyzing our potsherds, writing reports, etc. Those who have worked in Baghdad will know that no matter how hard one labors at such chores progress is always slow.

Tomorrow we plan to take to the field again. We are heading for U-qair and Jemdet Nasr in an effort to find other sites of comparable age which once formed a line of settlements along a watercourse. This time we are taking our base with us in the form of a tent and a minimal supply of water and food. To go back to and come out from a base like Hillah consumes too much time when considerable distances are involved. This will be our first attempt at this "camping type" of operation. Now that summer has ended, however, and the nights are much cooler the time should be right for this kind of travel. We will go both with our Jeep and Jeep Station Wagon. The Station Wagon will be our supply carrier and the Jeep the mobile striking unit of our task force.

At this point I should like to say how fortunate we are to have such an adequate headquarters in Baghdad. We have been extended the full use of the facilities of the Deutsches Archaeologisches Institut by its director, Professor Dr. H. Lenzen, leader of the annual German excavations at Warka and by Dr. O. Edzard, his capable assistant. The Institut is located on a quiet side street not far from the North Gate. The house itself is spacious and comfortable and the gracious hospitality of our hosts is difficult to imagine let alone experience. Dr. Adams and I share a room, work in a large office, and have access to the growing library. At the end of numerous days in the field it is most comforting to know that we have such a place to which we can retreat to work and to rest.

We have been extended every courtesy and possible assistance by the Department of Antiquities beginning with the Director General, H. E. Dr. Naji al-Asil himself, and including Sayid Tana Baqir, Sayid Fuad Safar, Dr. Basmachi, Sayid Bushir Francis, and a host of others.

We look forward to a season of productive labor with these facilities and this cooperation at our command. I shall do my best to keep you informed as the season unfolds.

Vaughn E. Crawford
Director of the Baghdad School